

Traveling the Distances of Karen Tei Yamashita's Fiction: A Review Essay on Yamashita Scholarship and Transnational Studies

By Pamela Thoma

It is a particular story that must be placed in its particular time and place. It is a work of fiction, and the characters are also works of fiction. Certainly it cannot be construed to be representative of that enormous and diverse community of which it is but a part. And yet, perhaps, here is a story that belongs to all of us who travel distances to find something that is, after all, home.

Karen Tei Yamashita, *Brazil-Marú*, frontispiece

Karen Tei Yamashita's sophisticated prose texts, including *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990), *Brazil-Marú* (1992), *Tropic of Orange* (1997), and *Circle K Cycles* (2001), encompass a vast range of narratives styles and genres.¹ Individually and collectively, they also present multiple perspectives and points of view, contemporary contexts and historical connections, physical and psychic distances. A vision with this scope can be a challenge for critics to navigate, and it can compel new critical approaches and intellectual paradigms, which is precisely the case in Yamashita scholarship. By focusing on issues associated with globalization, which recur throughout the texts, scholars are able to trace the great distances traversed through Yamashita's work. These issues include global economic policies and inequalities, the migration of people, cultural flows and consumer culture, information and digital technology (i.e. "informatics") or new types of knowledge, global ecology, the dynamic borders of nation-states, and the re-organization of community. In critically exploring issues associated with globalization, scholars from numerous disciplines and interdisciplinary fields take, in the broadest sense of the phrase, transnational approaches to studying Yamashita's work. Her writing has drawn the attention of scholars from Asian American literary studies, border studies, comparative literary studies, ecofeminist and environmental cultural studies, Japan studies, and Latin American studies. The critical consensus is, in fact, that, "Yamashita's literary imagination in every way resists artificial division," including not only academic disciplines, but also publishing categories and literary genres, such as U.S. ethnic literature, Asian American literature, Asian American women's literature,

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postcolonial literature, diasporic literature, postmodern literature, science fiction, and magic realism (Rody "Transnational Imagination" 134).

In part because Yamashita's fiction does not sharply focus on the meaning of Japanese American identity and experience in the United States and thus defies literary categorization in long-established U.S. ethnic and national terms, and in part because Asian American studies has historically devoted so much energy toward claiming recognition for the writing of Asian Americans *within* the tradition of U.S. American literature, published commentary by Asian Americanists has been slim until relatively recently. As transnational approaches have been developing in Asian American studies, however, Yamashita has increasingly received more critical attention. Therefore, to the extent that Yamashita has presented significant opportunities for critics to conduct transnational studies and debate new reading approaches, her fiction has made an extremely important contribution to the expansion of Asian American literary studies beyond the borders of the United States or to "extranational" concerns (Chuh 620). While significant debate surrounds the meaning of the term "transnationalism," for some scholars in American and feminist studies it is a category of analysis that "challenges the nation by revealing nationalism as ideology" or by revealing beliefs about the nation which are dynamic and contested rather than fixed in meaning or significance (Briggs, McCormick, and Way 627). In this usage, transnational historical analysis resists the timeless view of the nation and tends to place critical emphasis on imperialism in the context of specific forms of nationalism and capitalism, such as late twentieth-century globalization (636). Similarly, I argue that in contemporary transnational literary studies, scholars focus on how a text may challenge a conventionally national point of reference and participate in a cultural critique of globalization. According to one recent definition in Asian American literary studies, the transnational perspective emphasizes "the multiple trajectories of Asian diasporas, the transcendental force of commercial market, the fluidity of cyberspace, and the growing impact of Asian capitalisms" (Ling 1).

Migration, Space, and Place

Without exception the critical works on Yamashita's writing have recognized her interest in the contemporary migration of people across space and the new local places created in the uneven development of global capitalism. "Yamashita's plots always begin," one critic observes, "with someone on the move, someone whose footsteps set global changes in motion" (Rody "The Transnational Imagination" 132). In one of the earliest (2001) published critical essays on *Tropic of Orange*, which has perhaps garnered the most attention of Yamashita's four books, Molly Wallace focuses on the "new" North America of 1994 when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) reconfigured Canada, the United States, and Mexico into a trading "block" with more porous economic borders but increasingly regulated territorial or physical borders. For Wallace, the novel is a fantastic indictment of regional economic agreements that work to the disadvantage of "developing" countries of the South but to the clear advantage of wealthy industrialized countries of the North. These contemporary trade agreements between historically unequal partners amount to a new form of colonialism by providing major corporations access to new consumer and labor markets across national borders and, after transnational corporations push out

smaller, local businesses and economic production, by providing a vulnerable pool of low-wage labor that migrates (often at great risk) to the United States or Canada in search of employment and to escape agreement-produced poverty. Furthermore, Wallace finds in *Tropic of Orange* a critique of discussions of globalization that simply separate economic flows from cultural flows, setting them up as opposites, where one is a material or “real” migration of people, goods, and capital across specific and dynamic space and the other is merely a metaphoric movement of ideas, values, and cultural practices across abstract space. The point is an important one because it gestures toward Yamashita’s personal experience as a Japanese American who was born in Oakland, California, and who has spent her creative adult life moving among Brazil, Japan, and the United States. Yamashita’s latest book, *Circle K Cycles*, most explicitly connects her own experiences to the reverse labor migration of Japanese-Brazilian communities to Japan, since it crafts together her personal journal, short fiction, photographs, advertisements, and documents associated with Nikkei (people of Japanese descent) into a hybrid life writing text—a type of pastiche—that melds genres.

More recently in a 2006 essay, Jinqi Ling also rejects the economic/cultural flows dualism when he examines Yamashita’s focus on Japanese-Brazilian interaction in *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, *Brazil-Marú* and *Circle K Cycles*. The stated goal of Ling’s transnationalism is to go beyond those “post-national procedures in Asian American literary studies” that nonetheless continue to marginalize the global South and privilege a U.S.-centered “imaginary of mobility” in which people move between Asian countries and the United States in a cosmopolitan world (1). This U.S.-centered and east-west focused reading practice would in effect ignore the economic contexts, past and present, which compel the global migrations and connections actually represented in Yamashita’s novels. Ling’s article builds on several alternative geopolitical alignments including Asian Pacific Rim studies and Chinese-Latin American labor immigration studies.

Another recent essay by Kandace Chuh advocates an alternative transnational spatial logic for Asian American literary studies to better understand the contemporary movements of people, goods, capital, and culture, although Chuh’s approach is defined as a “hemispheric literary criticism” that emerges from the recent development of a hemispheric U.S. American studies. “[H]emispheric studies,” Chuh suggests, “prompts a collaborative and dynamic link among studies of the Americas writ large” (619). Hemispheric critiques shift focus toward north-south connections with a critical stance toward U.S. culture and politics, and comparative analysis of “the irregular emergence and kinds of modernities across the Americas” (629). Chuh uses Yamashita’s writing to illustrate what such a project might look like, even though she acknowledges that for Yamashita, “nation, and to some extent, hemisphere are categories utterly inadequate for the task of capturing the geographies of her imagination” (621). The key concepts in hemispheric studies include the significance of spatial location, the negotiation of linguistic differences, and the impact of variegated histories (635). Chuh’s essay explores the nature of home as represented in *Brazil-Marú* and *Circle K Cycles* and provides detailed contexts for the migration of Japanese to Brazil in the early twentieth century and for the reverse migration of Japanese-Brazilians in the late twentieth century.

The scholarship on Yamashita's fiction that focuses on the movement or migration of people and culture across space, particularly national borders, and the changes to specific places that such movements precipitate, employs and develops various transnational perspectives to analyze her creative vision of a globalizing world. Still, Rachel Lee cautions readers to notice that when critics create new paradigms that expand the parameters of their fields, they inevitably establish new boundaries or "reterritorialize" their fields (*Americas* 108). Indeed, those of us who employ transnationalism from within or in association with the U.S. academy must be attentive to the privileges and economic implications of our location, since it is indeed "potentially just another imperial vantage point" to write from a relative position of wealth in a deeply hierarchical structure (Briggs, McCormick, and Way 644). Other Yamashita scholarship attempts to avoid some of these problems by de-emphasizing spatial logic.

Time, History, Future

Even as the historical bases of the migration represented in *Brazil-Marú* and *Circle K Cycles* are acknowledged, only a handful of critics have considered Yamashita's treatment of movement across or through time. Given Ursula Heise's specialization in comparative literature, it is perhaps not surprising that her reading of *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* emphasizes the connections between an earlier colonialism that influenced the postcolonial narrative form or genre of magic realism among Latin American writers and the current neocolonialism that surfaces in the category-defying or hybrid fiction of Yamashita. Heise carefully analyzes how Yamashita reworks Columbian writer Gabriel Garcia Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and Brazilian writer/intellectual Mário De Andrade's *Macunaíma* (1928), to explore the experience of place (the Amazonian rainforest) through time in *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (139). J. Edward Mallot also links Yamashita's use of magic realism to international political economy, a combination that "offers her a context to critique modes of production and consumption in global markets" (115). Specifically, Yamashita uses magic realism to question how commodities gain so much authority and value within global capitalism, transformed as if by magic in the exchange process into far more powerful forces than one would predict given their material form. In addition to placing *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* in a transhistorical context, Heise highlights Yamashita's use of a non-human narrator to tell a "futuristic" story of its own creation out of plastic and its diseased, bacterial demise, which deliberately disrupts what may seem to be a simple story about a distinct past, present, and future. For Heise, Yamashita's insight is that place or "nature in its local manifestation does not appear as a stable ground in which human identities can be firmly rooted, but as a dynamic force of constant transformation" through time as well as space (149).

Three published essays on *Tropic of Orange* pay close attention to how connections among characters exist beyond, as well as across or through, closed systems of space and time--that is, outside physical presence. To understand the different kinds of connections depicted in Yamashita's novel, Ruth Hsu suggests using chaos and quantum theories and indigenous and non-Western knowledges. Hsu argues that, in drawing on alternative epistemologies, "*Tropic of Orange* . . . rewrite[s] the devastating and persistent effects of the modern era of European colonialism on non-Western peoples. The narrative seeks to displace

and put in its proper place the West's self-congratulatory and narcissistic history of itself" (80). In addition to analyzing the connections suggested by the novel's two tables of contents and seven narrators, Hsu asserts that one narrator's version or vision of reality--Manzanar Murakami's--is actually privileged, but this is because "he senses the absent-presence that defies our conventional notions of order, of space and time, and . . . of relatedness" (90). Similarly focusing on the network that connects Murakami to the other narrators, Gayle K. Sato finds his point of view an "inter-subjective, collaborative narration," which illustrates the idea that all seven narrators are required to tell the story and evidences "Yamashita's belief that no phenomenon can be adequately represented by a single point of view" (198). In fact, it is inter-subjectivity and a dialectical approach that define transnational philosophy for Laura Doyle, and this literature thus provides a "micro-world" for exploring relations between and among nations and an alternative understanding of the human subject (3). In a third analysis of *Tropic of Orange*, the Western universalism or "we perspective" in global village narratives of globalization is critiqued because, although those stories claim that globalization benefits everyone, current globalization is largely a one-way imposition of exploitative models of economic development, of hierarchical social values of progress, and of assimilative cultural unity, which benefits only elite members of the village (S. Lee 502). Instead of dismissing the idea of a global community altogether, however, Sue-Im Lee argues that the "novel posits another model of global collectivity, a different rationale for a globalist 'we' that can express the transnational, transcontinental nature of human existence without imperialist dimensions" (503). This "we" is the "romantic universalism" of ideal and inclusive communities that must be imagined by and is necessary for the formation of progressive political movements and the concept of human rights (513). As Lee reads *Tropic of Orange*, "its characters, whose formally disparate lives, separated by oceans and continents, are brought into hitherto unknown proximity and interconnectedness with each other" (502). Notably, this collectivity is organized through political vision rather than through physical presence.

Politics, Environment, Community

Some of the most provocative Yamashita scholarship is found in essays that address the global ecological or environmental issues her work raises and that recognize the importance of imagining alternative forms of community, echoing the idea mentioned above that culture should not be understood as something entirely separate from the natural, material, or political world. As Julie Sze argues in an essay on *Tropic of Orange*:

The environmental justice movement is a political movement concerned with public policy, as well as a cultural movement concerned with ideology and representation. Environmental justice challenges the mainstream definition of environment and nature based on a wilderness/preservationist frame in foregrounding race and labor in its definition. It places people, especially *racialized communities*, and *urban spaces* at the center of what constitutes environment and nature. (29, original emphasis)

Sze makes the important point that the environmental justice movement must acknowledge the role of cultural analysis in challenging mainstream definitions

and creating social change. In short, political movements would be wise to use novels, film, and music to reveal and understand social injustice and to conceptualize alternatives. The essay goes on to describe how the academic field of environmental justice studies (or the allied field of environmental cultural studies) brings cultural analysis to the environmental justice movement; *Tropic of Orange* is an example of a useful text that has plenty to offer the environmental justice movement because it “illuminates our understanding of the geography of free trade, the gender politics of environmental justice, and the role of raced and classed people in the postindustrial city that functions as a nodal point in global movement of people and goods” (40).

Taking up the relation between the local and the global, Heise’s “Local Rock and Global Plastic: World Ecology and the Experience of Place,” questions assumptions in anti-globalization and environmentalist movements that “the alienation of individuals and communities from their natural surroundings” or a sense of place, can be remedied by “reterritorialization” or a reclamation of the local (130). Heise points out how this view assumes that the local still exists as it did in an earlier period, a notion that is challenged by many geographers, political economists, and cultural texts such as Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*. The novel explores the question of how to reattach to nature in the context of globalizing processes as it “portrays the multiple and varied attachments to place that are formed when a strange new substance is discovered in the midst of the Amazon rainforest” (132). Ultimately, “The Matação signals not only that there is no such thing as pristine wildlife left, but more decisively that there is no local geography that isn’t already fundamentally shaped by global connectivity” (135). Rather than pure lamentation, however, Yamashita’s text advances understanding of contemporary globalization because it reveals that the basic oppositions between and local/global and real/artificial are unclear and even outmoded frameworks of understanding.

In “The Transnational Imagination,” Caroline Rody asserts that “the boundary crossing energies of Yamashita’s work ultimately serve . . . a profoundly ecological vision Yamashita folds a postmodern vision that is at once ethical and centered on the power of nature, on the unpredictable, irrepressible natural energies that overcome artificiality, divisions, tyranny and oppression, and death itself” (140). As evidence, Rody points out that even as *Tropic of Orange* and *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* end in disaster, Yamashita retains hope in the survival of at least some characters, which promises that communities will be rebuilt.

Hope

In many discussions, Yamashita’s works are considered apocalyptic, dystopic, or at least constitute serious critiques of globalization through the use of satire, fantasy, and counter example. They are read as cautionary tales that, while humorous and playful, warn us of the disastrous effects of commercial greed, unsustainable consumerism, neocolonial power relations, misapplied technology, and other processes associated with global capitalism. These analyses of Yamashita’s fiction take transnational approaches to literary studies to participate in a “critical globality” that questions representations of global culture, particularly those emerging from a U.S. context (Wallace 146). Although Yamashita’s works provide satiric representations of racial, environmental, and

economic injustice, critics nevertheless acknowledge that her writing can help compel us toward a different future. In this sense, we can also read incredible optimism in Yamashita's fiction. As Caroline Rody writes, "this is the ultimate context . . . in which we should understand Yamashita's experimentation with the interethnic, the transnational, and the sublime: an ethical politics devised from a vision of human subsumption in a wider ecology" ("Transnational Imagination" 140). Furthermore, Rody reads Yamashita's vision as broadly democratic since "the mass aspiration for a better life remains for her the most stirring phenomenon, with a transformative potential for even the North" (138). While refusing the extremes of uncritical celebration and romantic tragedy, Yamashita's fiction honors the hopeful and at times utopian ways that people imagine and create community. In the texts that make use of magic realism, namely *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* and *Tropic of Orange*, those elements highlight the fantastic and the unbelievable circumstances within which people form community. For some readers, the realist historical fictions that represent marginalized immigrant and diasporic communities in *Brazil-Marú* and *Circle K Cycles* even more emphatically highlight how people pursue dreams and hope for alternatives despite overwhelming global forces.

A transnational approach to literature in its various configurations is now established in Asian American literary studies, and it is no longer necessary for scholars to argue that the U.S. is not the only context that truly matters. Still, *Brazil-Marú*, which was the first novel Yamashita wrote, has received the least critical attention of the four books discussed here, and one can only speculate if this is because it does not feature the U.S., either in the setting of the novel or as its primary object of critique. This fact registers that theoretically and aesthetically, as well as politically and economically, the nation-state remains a powerful structure, and scholars must continue to grapple with how the national re-emerges in the transnational (Koshy 75). Speaking to one of the ways that analysis of the nation and nationalisms remains incomplete, Candace Fujikane's 2005 essay on native nationalisms functions as a call to settler communities, including Asian American communities, to recognize and defend indigenous rights to sovereignty, especially in the context of globalization's effects on territorial borders. Just as there are various transnationalisms, Fujikane instructs that there are many versions of nationalism, so the wholesale rejection or endorsement of nationalist projects is reductive.

As if in response, Kandice Chuh's comments on *Brazil-Marú's* epilogue focus on "the histories of displaced indigeneity" (628). For Chuh, the closing of the novel indicates "awareness of the infinite other stories existing beyond the bound of this novel and beyond the trope of immigration, which are as yet unrepresented and perhaps unrepresentable within the economy of visibility marked by national, transnational, or global" frameworks (628). In the post-9/11 context especially, these critical insights have taken on the life and death proportions of war in U.S. military actions and political rhetoric that consistently deploy contradictory and multiple constructions of nationalism, transnationalism, and globalism in order to claim the right to deny the sovereignty of other nations' borders in defense of U.S. national security in the "war on terror." Political realities demand that we remain vigilant in specifically identifying and challenging imperialist aggression using all means available, including cultural texts such as Yamashita's and a variety of analytical

and interpretive practices. Mirroring the texts themselves, the rich scholarly appraisal of Yamashita's work is appropriately not contained by one approach or located in one field; it provides some of the most relevant and necessary analysis of fiction written in English, traveling the distances required in the cultural critique of contemporary globalization.

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¹ On May 1, 2010, Yamashita's novel *I-Hotel* will be published by Coffee House Press. Set squarely in San Francisco's Chinatown and elaborating Asian American activism and politics, the novel may be the most identifiably "Asian American" of any of her previous works.